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Official Report of Debates (Hansard)

Wednesday 8 March 2017

Journal des débats (Hansard)

Mercredi 8 mars 2017

Standing Committee on
the Legislative Assembly

Petitions

Comité permanent de
l'Assemblée législative

Pétitions



Chair: Monte McNaughton
Clerk: William Short

Président : Monte McNaughton
Greffier : William Short

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON
THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLYCOMITÉ PERMANENT DE
L'ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE

Wednesday 8 March 2017

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The committee met at 1302 in committee room 1.

PETITIONS

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Welcome to the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly. We're here once again to discuss electronic petitions. Ultimately, I'm hoping the committee can come to a decision on whether to either proceed or not.

We had a couple of requests last week, and everyone has in front of them the response to the question.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): It was emailed out as well.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Everybody would have seen it, hopefully, via email.

What is the committee's feeling on electronic petitions? Anyone? Ms. Wong.

Ms. Soo Wong: Thank you to the Clerk for the follow-up with regard to questions from our colleagues.

The first question is, how much would it cost for a new procedural Clerk? The House of Commons advised us that if we are going to go forward with e-petitions, it would mean new staff. What does it cost for that? We heard the cost for the House of Commons annually and then monthly, right? What is the cost associated with this new procedural Clerk?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): I'll let the Clerk answer.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): The Clerk mentioned last week that we would attempt to move forward with the e-petitions project, if the committee and the House were to agree to go forward with it, without adding any new staff. We would work within the complement within House documents right now.

But the question, I think, was directed to whether or not the House of Commons needed to add one or two staff members, and in fact they did have to add one staff member.

Here, our goal would be, at the beginning of the implementation of the e-petitions site, to work within the staff that we currently have within House documents.

Ms. Soo Wong: Okay. Mr. Chair, through you to the staff, I have a couple of technical questions dealing with—one of many—in terms of ministers or ministries responding to these online petitions. In terms of government response to these petitions when they're tabled electronically and they're posted, how will the staff notify the minister/ministry about these online petitions?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): Last week, the Clerk mentioned that the process right now with the paper petitions would be similar to the process with the electronic petitions.

My understanding is that Cabinet Office facilitates all of the responses from each ministry and then sends them down to House documents. Currently, with the hard-copy petitions—I can't speak on behalf of Cabinet Office, but I'm assuming it would be a similar process where they would facilitate the answers from the ministry once a petition had reached the threshold of the amount of signatures it needed. Then, within the 45 calendar days for the response, Cabinet Office would facilitate the responses from whichever ministries were involved, and send them down to House documents like they do right now, which is the process with the hard-copy petitions. Then our office archives those, looks after them and sorts them based on petition and response.

Ms. Soo Wong: So with regard to the online system, my question is, will there be more than one portal for all ministries—like, there are so many ministries right now—in terms of responses, so that each ministry will have its own portal and then they are required to post that information for transparency? The management of that portal: Is it the ministry, or the Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): I'm assuming, if this went forward, that each ministry or Cabinet Office, whoever, would have to come up with something at their end that we wouldn't necessarily be part of. They have their own documents and processes that they work off of. I can't speak to what they would do or how they would do it; I just know that the response would eventually make its way to House documents, which is then where we deal with it and do what we do with that document.

Ms. Soo Wong: I have other questions, but my colleagues probably have others too.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Kiwala, did you have a question?

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Sorry. Soo, were you—

Ms. Soo Wong: I'm done. I'm done because I don't want to hog—I do have more questions.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: So, with respect to staffing, who would monitor the uploading of new petitions?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): Currently, we have a senior Clerk of House documents, along with three procedural services assistants of House

documents. So the procedural side of the monitoring would be done by the senior Clerk of House documents. There's also a process in place where two table officers do get involved in proofing and certifying the hard-copy petitions that are tabled right now, which is the process. So between the senior Clerk of House documents and other table officers, there would be some form of monitoring the petitions that are going online.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Okay. Sorry, just to backtrack a little bit, you said there would be a response requested within—was it four to five—

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): It's 45 calendar days.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: So if a petition reached 500 signatures by Friday before the long weekend, then we had the long weekend, then we got back and it was a contentious issue or a challenging issue or some more research needed to be done, there would only be a day or two at the most to—

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): So 45.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Oh, 45. I thought you said four to five.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): No, 45.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: All right. That's a little better. I thought that was pretty efficient. Okay. That's great, then.

How many petitions did Quebec receive when they switched?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): It was on that chart, I believe.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Is it on the chart?

Ms. Laurie Scott: It's on that chart from the second page.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Okay.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): The chart went from 2008 to 2017 and marked down the election years and the data as of March 2, 2017. So in total, from 2008-09, it was 1,503 e-petitions total.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: Okay. So if something goes wrong with the system, can you tell us anything about what the contact is going to be like for troubleshooting? Who is going to be responsible for that, both physically to solve the problem, but also in terms of costs? If something is happening in the House of Commons, are we then going to have to pay for a fix on our end as well?
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The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. William Short): I think the Clerk mentioned last week that if we were to go forward with this, we would have to draft up some sort of a service-level agreement with the House of Commons. We would have to have a conversation about it. In the money that they gave us in the quotes, there was a 24/7 support system for the emergency level, so obviously we would have to figure out what constitutes an emergency-level problem versus if there was a glitch with, I don't know, whatever, when they were trying to input something. There would be different levels of support built in,

and that would be something that we would discuss at the time of the service-level agreement that we would draft up with the House of Commons.

Ms. Sophie Kiwala: All right. Do you guys have anything else?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong, did you have anything else?

Ms. Soo Wong: I will move a motion later, Mr. Chair, in case there are other questions.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any other discussion on whether the committee wants to proceed with electronic petitions? It would go to the Board of Internal Economy next.

Ms. Laurie Scott: Soo, go ahead and ask the questions.

Ms. Soo Wong: What's that?

Ms. Laurie Scott: If you have more questions—

Ms. Soo Wong: I don't have any more questions. I want to move a motion. That's what I'm trying to say.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Sure. You can move a motion any time, Ms. Wong.

Ms. Soo Wong: I'm going to move that this whole file called electronic petitions go to a subcommittee, because not only are there technical issues—I still have lots of concerns about the staffing, the cost. We have to remember that once we open the floodgates to e-petitions, it's not just here for one term only, right? It's for life—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong, sorry. We'll talk about the motion. What is the motion? That it moves to a subcommittee?

Ms. Soo Wong: To a subcommittee for further discussion about this particular file.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): And then discussion on the motion?

Ms. Soo Wong: Yes.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. Any discussion?

Ms. Laurie Scott: So a subcommittee of us?

Ms. Soo Wong: Us. That's what I'm trying to say.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): To the subcommittee.

Ms. Soo Wong: To the subcommittee.

Ms. Laurie Scott: But then the subcommittee has to report back to the committee.

Ms. Soo Wong: Yes, whenever we have some meetings and discussion.

Ms. Laurie Scott: You guys have been doing this for two and a half years. I don't know what—

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Mr. Mantha?

Mr. Michael Mantha: I'm expressing the same as my friends in here. I'm just wondering—we've talked about this issue, and I'm not sure why we can't have those questions here that are coming up. I look at this as a tool that is going to create further engagement for people across the province, as far as coming here. I think the numbers that we have are there. The rules of the Clerks are clearly indicated. I'm not sure what the point of having further subcommittee meetings is going to clarify.

Everybody that has come through these doors has provided the information that we need. I think that information is there from what we've done over the last many, many months. I'm just trying to get a sense of what the purpose is going to be of having further subcommittee meetings. It's what I'm not clear on.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Further debate on Ms. Wong's motion?

Ms. Soo Wong: Mr. Chair, with regard to—because I know Ms. Scott was just recently appointed to this committee. When you look at the data from both the House of Commons federally as well as the British House of Commons, they just implemented e-petitions. For the House of Commons, it was 12 years. They debated for 12 years. We just started down this road two years ago. The British House of Commons started talking about this in 2007 and implemented it in 2015. We started down this road only two years ago.

The other piece here is my understanding—the Clerk can verify my comments—that it will require the House to open some standing orders. Am I correct to say that?

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Yes.

Ms. Soo Wong: So this conversation needs to be discussed with the House leaders, in my understanding, and furthermore, given the fact that we've only been talking about this for the last two years—I know the member from the third party said, "Why delay it any further?" I know my constituents are interested in e-petitions. So are lots of my colleagues. But having said that, given the technical piece but also the cost as well as staffing, I think once we open the floodgates to allow e-petitions here, the train is out of the station. You can't pull back. But with the standing order reopening, that needs to be discussed with the House leaders, because it just cannot be done overnight, right? That's my concern. I think all three parties need to go back to the House leaders so that we can have further discussion at the subcommittee level so that we can come back with the recommendations. Those are my comments.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any further debate? Mr. Mantha.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Can you, point form, give me an idea of what we have to discuss further, that is not already available, at subcommittee? If we're going to do that, I just want it to be productive. I want to know what I have to go out and get.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Ms. Wong?

Ms. Soo Wong: I'm not sure Mr. Mantha understands. I just mentioned, and the Clerk verified, that in order for us to move this forward for electronic petitions, we have to open the standing orders. It's not like it could be done through this committee. The standing orders have to be opened.

Normally you go through the House leaders to address these issues. My concern here is that if we're going to open the standing orders, we'd better make sure that the House leaders are aware of this. As I said earlier, we have only started on this conversation, for two years—the House of Commons, 12 years bringing in e-petitions. It just got into the House of Commons in 2015. The British House of Commons took eight years to do theirs.

It's not like I don't want to do it. Trust me; I want to do it, like, yesterday. But given the opening of the standing orders, we have to have this conversation with the House leaders.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Any further debate? Mr. Mantha.

Mr. Michael Mantha: So it's really not a discussion that we're going to have at subcommittee; it's something that we need to have our House leaders consider?

Ms. Soo Wong: Probably.

Mr. Michael Mantha: Okay. I just like to be prepared if we're going to have something over at subcommittee. If we're comfortable with the content and how the information was shared, and the main concern is opening up—I agree with you that it's a discussion that, if the House leaders already haven't had, they should have. If we leave from here with that in mind, then all right. Now I know where we're going.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. We have a motion by Ms. Wong. Any further discussion? Are the members ready to vote? All in favour? Carried. It's going to the subcommittee, then.

I just wondered, on that note, if the subcommittee members would have a few minutes to meet after this meeting regarding a letter from the Speaker that I just want to pass by you. It will only take five minutes.

Interjections: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Monte McNaughton): Okay. We're adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1318.

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